Two Birthdays a Hundred Years Ago

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A Speech to the Toast of the Association of Physicians, at its Annual Dinner, Belfast, 3rd June, 1949

As President, it is my great privilege and honour to propose the toast of the Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland.

The Association has only once previously met in Belfast; in 1927, twenty-two years ago to this very day (3rd June, 1949).

The dinner on that occasion, presided over by the late Professor James A. Lindsay, a great clinical teacher, philosopher and classic, was rendered memorable by a presentation to Sir William Hale White, who had held the office of treasurer for twenty years, indeed from the first meeting in 1907.

The passing of Sir William in February last, full of years and honours, brought a very real sense of personal loss to our older members.

He had had a large share in the founding of this Association. The story is recorded in his own words in the memorial volume to Sir William Osler : "Many years ago, Kanthack, Garrod, and I considered the publication of papers, which, although of interest to those working at the scientific aspect of medicine, did not appeal to the majority of those in practice. The untimely death of Kanthack put an end to our plan, but when Osler became Regius Professor at Oxford the two of us left asked his help to revive it. He threw himself into the matter with enthusiasm and suggested that at the same time an Association of Physicians should be formed."

I remember the delight with which Sir William visited the Giant's Causeway on the Sunday following the meeting and recalled, but only to refute, the saying of the great Samuel Johnson, "The Giant's Causeway is worth seeing, but not worth going to see."

The second meeting in Belfast happily coincides with the hundredth birthday of The Queen's University of Belfast. In this hall, in December, 1849, with great pomp and ceremony, the formal opening of the College took place.

And 1849 witnessed also, on the other side of the Atlantic, the birth of one destined to leave an imperishable impress on Canadian, American, and British medicine, the man whose mind first conceived the foundation of our Association—William Osler.

To-night, for a few minutes, I should like to speak of these two birthdays and of the medical background of a hundred years ago.

Queen Victoria had been eight years on the throne when, in 1845, the Government of Sir Robert Peel established the Queen's University of Ireland, consisting of three constituent colleges, one of which was to be built in or near the town of Belfast.

Belfast was then a pleasant Georgian town of about one hundred thousand

inhabitants, whose business life largely centred in and around the White Linen Hall, already the hub of the linen industry in these isles. The harbour and the great shipbuilding yards were still things of the future.

The site chosen for the new Queen's College was in the unspoilt countryside on the road to Dublin, a pleasant stroll for the citizens on a Sunday afternoon from the centre of the town.

Earlier in the year Queen Victoria had visited the building, accompanied by the Prince Consort. Prince Albert had taken a real interest in the new university scheme, had helped to frame the statutes and had seriously considered the invitation to become its first chancellor.

To-day we criticize the lack of foresight, which only took in eleven acres as a building site, but few could have anticipated the wonderful success which the new college was destined to achieve. An average attendance of two hundred students in the first decade has grown to over twenty-five hundred, which includes about seven hundred medical students.

The outstanding personality amongst the new professors was Thomas Andrews, Professor of Chemistry and Vice-President of the College.

The work on which his reputation mainly rests was concerned with the liquefaction of gases, and he was the first to demonstate the continuity of the liquid and gaseous states. Tradition states that many of his researches were carried out in the quadrangle under the ancient laburnum, whose declining years are receiving careful geriatric attention.

One hundred years ago a new era for medicine had dawned. The first English Public Health Act, 1848, had declared a national assault "on the permanent overhanging mist of infection, the epidemic pestilence, and the abiding host of disease." The fight for better sanitation had at least commenced.

The discovery of anæsthesia opened vast possibilities for surgery. But sepsis must first be overcome. In 1849 the voice of Semmelweiss was raised, proclaiming the nature of and the methods for the prevention of puerperal sepsis, but his was a voice in the wilderness, either unheeded or unbelieved or ridiculed.

Another sixteen years were to elapse before the long battle against sepsis was launched, but already the future leaders of the struggle were in training.

Pasteur, the 27-year-old Professor of Physics at Dijon, was still absorbed by his right and left-handed crystals of tartaric acid, but soon he turned to the problems of fermentation and gave Joseph Lister the clue to the prevention of hospital gangrene and the other fatal sequelæ of surgery, with which, as a student at University College Hospital, he was making his first actual contact.

Clinical medicine was in its heyday. The mantle of Richard Bright had descended on the shoulders of Thomas Addison, who, in 1849, read a paper before the South London Medical Society, in which he described the symptoms and signs of disease of the suprarenal capsules and became the pioneer of endocrinology.

These, too, were the glorious days when the Dublin School reached the summit of its fame in medicine, and Robert James Graves and William Stokes, in the Meath Hospital, introduced clinical teaching at the bedside. Their work, as Osler

later said, "Is full of lessons for those of us who realize that the best life of the teacher is in supervising the personal daily contact of patient with the student in the wards."

Had this Association been in existence and had it been meeting in Belfast one hundred years ago, this chair would probably have been occupied by Henry McCormac, a man of genius neglected by his contemporaries, who preached before his time the doctrine of fresh air and the open window in the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis. The painting of his famous son, Sir William McCormac, in the scarlet and gold of the robes of President of the Royal College of Surgeons, hangs on yonder wall, and the medical tradition of the family is still actively carried on by two of his grandsons, Professor H. R. Dean of Cambridge and Dr. Henry McCormac of the Middlesex Hospital.

This centenary year of Osler's birth should be remembered gratefully by us at this meeting. My younger narrower path never crossed his older wider orbit, and so I fain could wish that someone, with a close and intimate knowledge of the man, could have recalled his memory for us this evening.

How highly he ranked the work done in connection with medical societies can be realized from this passage from "his account book" :—"Completed to-day ten years in Oxford. Extraordinarily happy years. I have done three useful things or better, helped to : (1) The Association of British Physicians; (2) The Quarterly Journal of Medicine; (3) The Historical Section of the Royal Society of Medicine."

On the other side of the Atlantic the year 1849 recalls the rush of the "forty-niners" to the gold fields of California. But there was no surplus gold to be found in the log parsonage at Bond Head, near the edge of the almost unbroken primeval forest which in those days was Upper Canada, where, on the 12th July, 1849, was born William Osler, the eighth child of the Rev. Featherston Osler and his wife, Ellen.

Mr. Osler had come from Cornwall and settled down as a missionary clergyman in the wilds of Canada twelve years before. The young pair had endured for the first few years a life of actual and almost intolerable hardship, but at the time of which I speak the family was comfortably established at Bond Head, a growing village of some two hundred people. The majority of the more recent colonists were ardent Orangemen from Ulster.

For some years it had been the custom of the Orangemen of the district to gather at Bond Head for their annual celebration of the Battle of the Boyne on the 12th of July, just as they had done in their native Ulster. Adorned with sashes and orange lilies, they marched to Mr. Osler's parsonage, where they were sympathetically and cordially received and speeches were made to the "pious, glorious, and immortal memory" of King William. On their annual visit in 1849 they learnt that a new baby boy had arrived that very day at the parsonage. The Orangemen insisted that he should be called William, despite the original choice of his parents for the names Walter Farquhar. The baby was promptly dubbed the Young Prince of Orange, and William he was duly christened. Cushing narrates that, on his subsequent birthdays, decked out in the appropriate colours of orange and

blue, he was brought out on the parsonage verandah to greet the procession, which the other children came to regard as arranged solely in his honour.

Just as Osler in his lifetime, whether in Montreal, Philadelphia, Baltimore or Oxford, was the teacher, friend, and fellow-student to every earnest seeker after truth in medicine, so to many of my and later generations who were brought up on his original text-book, who have read his monographs, and who have studied and pondered his addresses, he is still the wise friend, the clinical adviser, the unseen consultant and the peacemaker when professional friction arises. His published addresses ensure the persistence of his influence. "He being dead yet speaketh." The essays in "Æquanimitas" should be the "Religio Medici" of every medical student and young doctor.

J. M. Barrie tells us: "If you have charm you don't need to have anything else."

"Osler's main strength lay in the singular and unique charm of his presence; in the sparkling brilliancy of his mind; in the rare beauty of his character and life, and in the example that he set to his fellows and his students. He was a quickening spirit." So wrote W. S. Thayer, his friend and colleague at Johns Hopkins. Let me conclude with a few lines of Thayer's poem on Osler :—

"A tongue that dances with the ready word
That like an arrow seeks the chosen goal,
A presence like the freshening breeze that as
It passes sweeps the poisoned cloud aside;
A heart whose alchemy transforms the dross
Of dull suspicion to the gold of love."

REVIEWS

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX. By Oswald Schwartz. Pp. 294. Pelican Books. 1s. 6d.

DR. SCHWARTZ'S book contains a mass of information and much erudition, but it is doubtful whether the title is a good one, for there is a deal of mysticism mingled with the psychology, and the digressions into history, philosophy, and theology are many, and prolonged.

Having said this, however, one must admit there is a great deal of useful guidance and common-sense in this volume. One must, too, be thankful to the doctor for saying boldly much that needed saying in this country—for drawing attention, for example, to the fact that many marriages fail because the husband has no knowledge of the technique of love-making, or, indeed, any inkling that there is such a thing. The treatment of the subject of masturbation is also thoroughly sensible.

On the whole, in spite of its longueurs, the book may be welcomed. D. B. M. L.

AIDS TO MATERIA MEDICA FOR NURSES. By A. E. A. Squibbs. Pp. 216. Baillière, Tindall & Cox. 5s.

THIS is a very useful book in the teaching of materia medica to nurses.

The method of classifying the drugs as used for the different systems of the body is easily understood by the nurse, even if repetition is involved.

The summary at the end is found particularly useful for the purpose of revision before examination.